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The Role of Religion in Socio-Cultural Processes: On the Example of Upper Silesia

I

Adapting the sociological perspective in studies on religious belief necessarily involves stressing the confirmatory function of religion in the face of the social world. From very early times religion has been the most effective and widely used instrument for self-validation of man's place in the world. The historical role that religion plays in the legitimising processes results from its unique ability to establish the phenomenon of human existence in the cosmic firmament.¹

Religion legitimates the world in the most basic, global dimension, giving it meaning and value, imposing a structure and hierarchy, determining the parameters of time and space, creating a symbolic universum of the social world. In the sociological perspective the substantiation of religion is performed within the frameworks of social structures called by Berger and Luckmann "receptive structure." Within their determined limits successive generations of human beings undergo socialisation in such a manner that the world of culture and nature surrounding them becomes their natural reality "arousing no disquiet": the world is regarded as an obvious fact *per se*, validated by the tradition handed down from generation to generation. Stability of the social structures makes possible the evolution

¹ P. L. Berger, *Zur Dialektik von Religion und Gesellschaft* (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1973), p. 35; W. Świątkiewicz, "Rola religii w procesach legitymizacji społecznego świata" ["The Role of Religiousness in the Processes of Legitimation of the Social World"], in *Świat społeczny i jego legitymizacje* [*The Social World and Its Legitimations*], ed. W. Świątkiewicz (Katowice 1993).

of an effective symbolical monopoly”² which is of itself a stabilising factor. Definitions of reality formulated within its limits promote the permanence of the social structures and rival conceptual visions of the symbolic universum are either overthrown by physical force or are woven into the fabric of tradition, adapted by it, or confined in their social potential by segregation measures. It is only when the “receptive structures” lose their privileged position or continuity due to upsetting or desintegration of the socialisation processes resulting from cultural diffusion or from external pressure — that the religious symbolic universum integrating the reality of the world into a rational whole, begins to lose its unchangeability, and its existence no longer wields the authority of unchallenged truth. The world of religion and the world of social structures it validates then become undermined.

II

Religion is a deeply founded entity in the socio-cultural tradition of Upper Silesia as the constitutive principle of their native culture, determining at the same time its identity and the regional individuality. Without reaching too far into past history, it is possible to distinguish at least three analytically separate complexes of factors which from the latter half of the 19th century began to decide the characteristic features of Silesian religious faith as a socio-cultural category and today are still shaping it.

1. A general thesis may be postulated that the dynamic urbanisation and industrialisation taking place in Upper Silesia in the latter half of the 19th century³ did not disturb the concentric ordering of the social structures typical of preindustrial societies. On the contrary, it would appear that these changes reinforced the social structures and an important contributory factor was religion, representing a source of values and standards legitimising the social order. Among those characteristics of societies whose structures were organised is a concentric pattern, which is portrayed as overlapping rings of ever widening social circles, a central position is taken by the family, fulfilling a multiple role as regards the widest social circles; the working environment, the dwelling place, the ethnic community, the parish. In communities of this

² P. L. Berger, T. Luckmann, *Spoleczne tworzenie rzeczywistości* [that is the Polish translation of the work: *The Social Construction of Reality*] (Warszawa 1983), p. 191.

³ L. Schofer, *The Formation of a Modern Labor Force. Upper Silesia 1865—1944* (University of California Press 1975).

type there exists a uniform hierarchy of values, standards, styles of life.⁴ It is easy to exert social control and bring to bear the pressure of public opinion and the environment reinforcing the "immutability" of the symbolic universum. In its axiological and customary dimension religion permeates all the social structures: the family, the local community, the educational system, professional bodies, associations of various kinds, etc., spreading over them their sacred frame of reference, forming a kind of "sacred firmament" stretched above the everyday social reality. The significance of religious values was grounded in the fact of the Catholic Church's direct involvement in the shaping, reinforcing and defending of the Christian ideals of social order and also in the Catholic social doctrine itself, confirmed in the defence of family ties and the upholding of group continuity, as opposed, for example, to Protestantism, which as Max Weber wrote: "sundered the fetters imposed by blood relationship replacing community of blood with community of belief."⁵

It is equally of importance to emphasise the role of ecclesiastical organisation in strengthening the concentric system of social structures. The separateness and indivisibility of a social group growing up due to the way in which the territory is divided is reinforced in this manner by the spatial differentiation of the religious unit (the parish). In this respect the Catholic Church in Silesia came up with a number of unconventional and for those times positively revolutionary initiatives, which viewed from the perspective of time have showed themselves to be factors fundamentally combating the dechristianising processes usually accompanying industrialisation and urbanisation.⁶ From the sociological aspect it must be acknowledged

⁴ Obviously this does not mean that these communities showed no examples of conduct escaping beyond social control and representing a threat to social order. Instances could be various kinds of social pathology accompanying spatial migration, the rising of the towns, unemployment, poverty. See, among other things, W. Świątkiewicz, "Zjawiska patologii społecznej w starej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej i ich kulturowe uwarunkowania" ["Social Pathology Symptoms in Old Housing-Quarters and Their Cultural Conditioning"], in *Normy społeczne — ład społeczny — patologia społeczna* [Social Norms — Social Order — Social Pathology], ed. J. Wódz (Katowice 1985).

⁵ Quoted from G. Lenski, "Wpływ religii na instytucje świeckie" ["The Influence of Religion on Secular Institutions"], in *Socjologia religii* [The Sociology of Religion], ed. F. Adamski (Kraków 1984).

There is no intention to belittle the role of the Evangelical churches in Silesia, the scope of their socio-national, cultural and political activities, relative to the proportional significance of these churches in the life of Upper Silesia.

⁶ D. Olszewski, "Stan i perspektywy badań nad religijnością XIX i XX wieku" ["Current State and Prospects for Studies on Religious Beliefs of the 19th and early 20th Centuries"], *Nasza Przyszłość*, vol. 59 (1983); J. Myszor, *Duszpasterstwo parafialne na Górnym Śląsku w latach 1821—1914* [Parish Ministry in Upper Silesia in 1821—1914] (Katowice 1991); R. Bigdoń, "Rozwój sieci parafialnej w miastach i w osiedlach centralnej części Górnośląskiego Okręgu

that religious practices organised by the parish and observed within its bounds, quite apart from the purely religious dimension had also a significant social dimension, in the sense that they made an appreciable contribution to social integration. This was especially noticeable when the boundaries of the newly growing up industrial settlements began to superimpose on the boundaries of the newly forming parishes. In the contemporary model of religious customs of that time the territorial parish represented a completely self-sufficient organizational structure ensuring all the most widely understood religious needs and in this sense it was an institution directed towards the "inside" of the community, confirming its internal structure and adding the sacred dimension to the various forms of social life. It is also noteworthy that this period was one in which the Catholic Church was seeking its place in the new social situation, shaped not only by urbanisation and industrialisation which had shattered the former principles of organisation of social life sacrificed by tradition and religion, but also by the newly emerging philosophical ideas and the escalating revolutionary ferment in Europe, frequently directed against the Church. The encyclical *Rerum novarum* promulgated in the last decade of the 19th century (1891) by Leon XIII was not only a doctrinal guide to future social activities but represented confirmation and validation of the actions already initiated, religious and moral, educational and cultural, charitable, political, economic and self-help in intention, undertaken by clergy and laity of this land, for the promotion of a social order inspired by Christian values.⁷ The social structure of the territorial communities in Silesia facilitated these efforts and at the same time strengthened them by their own particular socialisation processes and upbringing, and by creating a relatively cohesive and stable religious-social reality.

2. An enormous influence in the shaping the social characteristic of the Silesian religious attitudes was also exerted by general European cultural

Przemysłowego w latach 1850—1914 (na przykładzie starej parafii NMP w Bytomiu oraz terenów z nią granicznych)" ["Development of the Parishes' Network in the Towns and Settlements of the Central Part of the Upper Silesian Industrial Area 1850—1914 (on the Example of the Old Parish of the BVM in Bytom and the Neighbouring Districts)"], *Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego*, No. 3 (1973); W. Świątkiewicz, "Wartości religijne i ich znaczenie w życiu miejskiej społeczności lokalnej" ["Religious Values and Their Importance in the Life of Urban Social Communities in Upper Silesia"], in *Przestrzeń — środowisko społeczne — środowisko kulturowe* [Space — Social Environment — Cultural Environment], ed. K. Wódz (Katowice 1992).

⁷ J. Wycisło, *Katolicka i polska działalność społeczna na Górnym Śląsku w XIX wieku* [Catholic and Polish Social Activities in Upper Silesia in the 19th Century]. Skoczów—Pszczyna 1989; K. Dola, "Wpływ Kościoła na kulturę życia codziennego mieszkańców Górnośląskiego Okręgu Przemysłowego w drugiej połowie XIX wieku" ["Influence of the Church on the Everyday Life Culture of the Inhabitants of the Upper Silesian Industrial Area in the Latter Half of the 19th Century"], in *Ks. Jan Alojzy Ficek i Piekary Śląskie w XIX wieku* [Priest Jan Alojzy Ficek and Piekary Śląskie in the 19th Century], ed. J. Wycisło (Katowice 1992).

processes which were manifested, especially in relation to Central Europe, in the awakening of ethnic awareness and nation-forming processes. A particular role was played in this matter by the renaissance of interest in the native language, which became ever more clearly a carrier of emancipation and the emergence of native culture, including religious culture. The clergy very quickly became aware that limiting the use of the Polish language, in line with the policies of the German authorities, meant weakening the effectiveness of their catechismal instruction, cut at the roots of the peoples' natural piety and fractured the cultural bounds, whose significance in the social consciousness began to increase. In defence of the Polish language and also the national individuality of the Silesians they called on natural law, handed down by God, indisputable and binding on the conscience. In this way the bonds existing in a specific social reality between the culture of the Polish people and their religious faith were not only supported for practical reasons — evangelical or political — but also gained a theoretical justification, linked to the contemporary teaching of the Church.⁸ The consequence of this fact was the emergence of religious motivations for the attitude joining into one the national and religious values, whose observance and defence was a matter of conscience. Another fact reinforcing the role of religion in the socio-cultural processes, although quite contrary to its planned intent, was the *Kulturkampf* announced in 1871 by the German authorities, actually directed both against the Catholic Church and the Polish identity. The integration of the Polish and Catholic elements led to a certain kind of instrumentalisation of these two values in the form of powerful symbiosis of religious and national values. This permeated all the plans of the social structures, promoting social awareness and directly influencing the domain of social activities by shaping criteria of identification of the world of "our" communities as distinguished from the social world of the "others." Religion constituted one of the most important factors in social consciousness, since it created a community of convictions and beliefs and facilitated its subjective and intentional experiences, organising by means of its institutions, both individual and collective practical actions growing out of this community of values respected. This placing of religion in the social structures and in the profoundest depths of the social personality created a specific kind of attitude towards the Church. This comprehended not only the sphere of religious practices included in the framework of "church religion," meaning those which are entirely governed by the institutional model of religious duties, but also spheres of social activities having no direct connection with religious practices

⁸ I. Mierzwa, "Rozwój polskiej myśli katolickiej na Śląsku w drugiej połowie XIX wieku" ["The Development of Polish Catholic Thought in Silesia in the Latter Half of the 19th Century"], *Studia Theologica Varsaviensia*, No. 2. (1980).

and relating to domains of politics, work, economics, education, recreation. Ecclesiastical consciousness is also acceptance of the religious doctrine legitimising social order in the various areas of social life, as also in relation to the totality of the social structures, which, as already mentioned, manifested characteristically a concentric ordering. This was expressed also in the models of individual biography inscribed in the rhythm of the religious life and taking on in this way a meaning and value bordering on the eschatological. Ethnographic studies provide numerous illustrations portraying the importance of religion as a value and its institutional dimensions in the modelling of the "transsituational" determinants of identity in the autoconception of individuals belonging to the regional community.⁹ Church consciousness — in the understanding presented here — expresses itself most markedly through the social functions of religious practices. This inscribing of religion in the social structure and in the structure of the mentality had the effect that social activities became socio-religious activities, permeating virtually every sphere of social life.

3. The third complex of factors constituting the specific nature of the Silesian religiousness as a cultural category is the consequence of both the form of the social structure and the Church consciousness. Considered in general terms there are the social functions of religion. Although immanently linked with the two earlier described factors, it is useful to distinguish them not only for analytical reasons (facilitating description and analysis of the phenomena) but also because in the very widest range they have persisted up to contemporary times. The religious life took its course in the framework of the numerous and varied associations and organizations from the purely Church ones to the entirely secular, having in their statutes, however, recognition of the religious values and the readiness to implement them.¹⁰ Here mention must be made of the custom of pilgrimages very strongly developed in Upper Silesia. Apart from their religious aspects these pilgrimages also clearly fulfilled socio-integrational functions, and along with these also recreational, educational, cognitive and artistic functions. A characteristic feature here were the "national pilgrimages" which combined the religious values with the traditions of national culture. Equally rich in social functions were the religious practices which the Catholics are obliged to observe by the Church requirements. Even

⁹ *Folklor Górnego Śląska* [*The Folklor of Upper Silesia*], ed. D. Simonides (Katowice 1989).

¹⁰ See, for example, J. Myszor, *Duszpasterstwo parafialne...* [*Parish Ministry...*]; K. Dola, *Wpływ Kościoła...* [*Influence of the Church...*]; W. Świątkiewicz, "Wymiary ładu społeczno-kulturowego" ["The Dimensions of Social-Cultural Order"], in *Ład społeczny w starych dzielnicach mieszkaniowych* [*Social Order in and Old Residential District*], ed. J. Wódz (Katowice 1986).

up to contemporary times there has persisted the custom of the so-called "bringing the offering." This is a ceremonial procession around the altar during the "offertorium," doing honour to the cross and leaving a money offering. This procession is clearly structured. At the head walk the donors requesting the mass of intention, behind them come the nearest relatives, neighbours, acquaintances. In the case of a service of general intention (e.g. for the homeland, for the parishioners) the procession is headed by the men walking in an order maintaining in general the recognised social position in the community, and only after them come the women, as a more weakly structured group. Participation in the procession was an external manifestation of solidarity with the intention of the mass and its donor. In the sociological sense it is the way of stressing social unity, and is scrupulously noted in the memories of participants in the mass, and also an example of social norm obliging to mutual observance of the custom. Social ties are strengthened in this way, people perceive their mutual bonds that link them, the ties of kinship, neighbourliness, the working community, ties of sympathy or at least friendly disposition. They form together a subtle web of social relations existing within the bounds of the community, which during the "bringing the offering" is spectacularly manifested, confirmed and reinforced. The number of persons taking part in the procession is undoubtedly a sociometric indicator of the social position occupied by the person principally involved with the intention of the mass or may indicate the status ascribed to the events for which the intentions have been requested. It is thus an illustration of the structure of social roles and positions and also the structure of cultural values upheld in the given community.

* * *

In model concept, the pattern of Silesian religious belief exhibits clearly closely interwoven elements of the religious and the social, following the model of the essential socio-cultural processes in Upper Silesia. Its significance may also be braced in the most recent events of political transformations taking place in the wake of the communist downfall. It is undeniable that religious belief conceived both in the institutional sense and also as an attitude of man towards institutionalised values, standards and symbols which individuals experience jointly as religious,¹¹ ingrained in the "national-religious" cultural tradition and being at once its carrier and watchman

¹¹ U. Bos-Nunning, *Dimensionen der Religiosität* (München 1972), p. 23; J. Mariański, *Religijność w procesie przemian* [Religious Faith in the Process of Transformations] (Warszawa 1991), pp. 16–25.

— to a certain degree immunised the collective mentality against the profound changes which according to the political plans of the state were to be the result of expansion, defined as “foreign,” not complying with tradition, of political doctrines and the communist model of personality and culture. Socially and in a sense collectively and jointly experiencing the religious values promoting social solidarity, accenting rather “we” than “I,” was achieved as it were at the cost of extending individual ambitious, especially of the intellectual type. This also led to the exalting to a “folklore” status of religious values, but nevertheless strengthened the role of religious belief as a cultural category.